

Chapter 13: Time in Hibernation

It always went like this. Life intruded on my emptiness in bursts, the times when Maikle or his assistants changed my med bags.

I'd been told that I shouldn't be aware of these moments when my body was taken out of a hibernation tube. Supposedly, my brain couldn't reboot quickly enough for something like that to happen, but this fact didn't change what I underwent every time I did an accelerated, full body transition.

Of course, in those moments, I wasn't pondering their impossibility or what they were. To me, it was as I'd said. Life popped into my non-existence, and what was life if not pain?

I surfaced to agony that turned the world white, setting my mind into a float, until I was erased again. What I felt in these blips was equivalent to what I'd experienced decades before, when I'd been under an Ancient's care, but fortunately, these present pains didn't last as long.

Still, I lived them. They were why when I was given a deep-cover mission, I didn't think too hard about the process that was needed to change my body.

I'd never told anyone the full depth of what they did to me.

Nine came and went and then...

Life relented.

Calming music played nearby while blue dissolved into blurry white. Voices mumbled and bounced nearby, one of them low and the other high in pitch. A blanket, warm and soft, muffled everything until a prick of pain flared. And another. Something amorphous slid across white, and a blinding light shone from a black blob: once, twice. Rough heat pressed to- to-

The essence of me seeped into my body, filling every weirdly new curve and proportion, and blinking, I desperately inhaled, as if it were the first breath I'd taken after drowning. I didn't move or acknowledge my panic. I'd been here too many times to believe myself in true danger.

Where was 'here' again?

My vision had gone all wonky, couldn't get my eyes to focus. Details kept switching between unrecognizably blurry and far too sharp, and when I tried to move my head, my muscles only twitched.

What had happened? Why was I laid out, helpless? This should concern me. I thought. Why didn't it?

The amorphous blob made another appearance, but I recognized it as a person this time. So, I tried to speak, asking where I was. Unfortunately, only a quiet grunt escaped from me.

It was enough to get the person's attention. They retreated for a moment before leaning over me again, peeling my eyelid down.

"Oh, shit. You're not supposed to... -ow are you awake? We knew about your faster than normal... but this is just ridiculous. Shit. Why am I ramb...?"

The person disappeared, and I was left alone with slowly churning fear. At least my vision was returning to my control. I could make out ceiling tiles in the few seconds between its extremes.

Someone else with smeared features came along.

"*Lokke Vitras*? It's Maikle. I don't know if you can understand me yet, but you woke up from hibernation earlier than expected again. You just sit tight while we finish up on our end. It shouldn't take long."

Oh... that was where 'here' was. Alterations. I was about to start a deep-cover mission. I remembered. Why couldn't I do that when I'd woken up?

That sequence of events had been... strange. Like my brain had been warming up after being put on ice after a while. I wondered if it was what waking up from stasis was like. I'd have to ask Korix the next time we spoke.

While waiting to gain control of my body, I resumed my current narration, listening to its tale as my surroundings grew steadily clearer. Maikle and his assistants poked their heads in and out of my view of the world, occasionally speaking to me, and after a while, the lord and master of alterations leaned over me with a hand on my shoulder.

"All right," he said. "Let's sit up, shall we?"

Someone—Maikle, presumably—shoved their arm under my back, and with some help, I got myself upright, swinging my legs over the edge of the tube. The effort left me out of breath.

"Wha-?"

Damn, Maikle had changed my voice this time too. Swallowing, I tried again.

"What happened?"

With a pinched face, Maikle said, "The same as always. You woke up from hibernation way earlier than you should have, and I don't know why. I adjusted your meds from the last time we did this. I just... my sincerest apologies, *Lokke Vitras*. I didn't mean to cause you trouble."

Tiredly, I flapped a hand.

“It’s fine. Just... unexpected. I’ll add it to the list of possible outcomes for this procedure,” I said. “Tell me the base that our wonderful process workers have provided for me. I’d like to know what I’m building my persona on.”

Maikle looked like he wanted to further discuss my anomalous reaction to what he’d done, but I didn’t want to get into it right now. I had my theories as to why hibernation didn’t work well on me, but not only would I rather keep people from learning about them, but I didn’t want to dwell on them either. So, when he didn’t start explaining, I raised an eyebrow at him.

Jerking into a bow, Maikle said, “O-of course, *Lokke Vitras*. Let me just-”

He spun, hurrying to a holodrama plate. While he played with something in his array, an assistant brought me a set of clothes, in annoyingly bright colors as expected, and I took off my hospital gown to get into something more comfortable. Behind me, Maikle coughed, and I glanced at him.

“What?” I said. “You crafted this body.”

“Yes. Of course. You’re right. It’s only...”

Red crept to the tips of Maikle’s ears.

“There are *certain parts* of the body that I don’t mess with unless it’s requested or a total change in gender is required.”

Glancing down, I said, “Oh.”

I snatched underclothes and slacks off of the hibernation chamber’s bed, throwing them on as quickly as I could.

“I’m sorry if I made you uncomfortable,” I said.

“Oh, no! You-”

Maikle tore his gaze away from me.

“I just thought you should know.”

With a smirk, I pulled my shirt over my head. It was probably best if I didn’t tease him, much as I wanted to.

“Well?” I said. “My base?”

Clearing his throat, Maikle said, “This one’s relatively simple. We had a House naming while you were under. I’m not sure if you knew about it.”

He’d said that like it had been a question, so I answered in the provided pause.

“I was aware.”

“Well, your base this time is an unHoused who’s recently chosen Zan,” Maikle said. “Do you have a persona to match?”

Someone young and fresh, who still believed in the good of the world. That was typically an easy roll to fill, but damn, if it wasn’t contrary to who I was right now. Still, I browsed my mental rolodex of personas until I landed on one who would fit.

“Rylan,” I said. “Naïve, innocent Rylan. He’ll work.”

“All right, then,” Maikle said. “I’ve sent you a file with your base’s details. Let me do a final check on your vitals, and you’ll be cleared, *Lokke Vitras.*”

He messed with me a bit more, but once he'd declared me fit for duty, I wandered out of alterations, grateful that my body was responding to me as it should. I might have my theories about why I'd experienced those brief moments that had come after my removal from hibernation, but even still, that time had been disturbing.

It was time to put it behind me, though. Time to go into deep cover.

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